



POP HEALTH CENTRAL NEWSLETTER

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POPULATION HEALTH IN ACTION

Community-Guided Research: Advancing Health Equity Through Partnership

Contributing Authors: Diane Hagerman, Executive Director, Rutgers Equity Alliance for Community Health

Some of the most meaningful research doesn't start with a hypothesis; it starts with a conversation. Across New Jersey, Rutgers faculty are sitting at community tables, listening to residents, learning from lived experience, and shaping projects together. When research is guided by the people closest to the issue, the work becomes sharper, more relevant, and more sustainable.

This idea is at the heart of the [Rutgers Equity Alliance for Community Health](#) (REACH). Active in New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, REACH supports researchers working with community-based organizations to co-design solutions. Rather than approaching a neighborhood with a pre-determined plan, Rutgers' colleagues ask: What matters most to you? And how can we address that together?

Below are three examples of how REACH-funded projects evolved because of community leadership. These projects share a simple truth: research becomes transformative when the community is not the subject of the work, but the partner in it.



Rutgers Health Service Corps: Leading the Colorectal Cancer Screening Charge

Contributing Authors: Horacio Hernandez, Population Health Fellow, Office of Population Health and John (Jack) Hemphill, Program Manager & Director, Rutgers Health Service Corps, Office of Population Health

The [Rutgers Health Service Corps](#) (RHSC) continues to make a meaningful impact across Rutgers Health through a wide range of initiatives this past academic semester. One of the most significant efforts has focused on improving colorectal cancer (CRC) screening rates across Rutgers Health practices.

RHSC students have played a vital role in increasing CRC screening among patients at the [Eric B. Chandler Health Center](#), a local Federally Qualified Health Center, by assembling and distributing more than 2,500 home stool-based colorectal cancer screening kits. Students also conducted follow-up calls to remind patients to complete and return their test kits. This project was recently presented at the annual [American Public Health Association National Meeting](#) in Washington, D.C.

In addition, we collaborated with the Rutgers RWJ Medical School General Internal Medicine practice and RWJBarnabas Health Population Health program to identify patients who were not up to date on CRC screening. By sending providers lists of their panel of patients who were overdue for screening, tracking tests ordered, and monitoring completion with support from RHSC students, this quality improvement project led to a 9% increase in CRC screening rates—from 73% to 82%.

Unhoused in New Brunswick

Principal Investigator: [Eric Seymour](#)

Seymour's team spent time in conversation with individuals experiencing homelessness, advocates, and local organizations. Instead of drafting a report in isolation, the researchers invited community partners into editing sessions to refine the findings and ensure the recommendations reflect real needs and lived wisdom. Read the full report, ["Homeless in New Brunswick and Programs to Address,"](#) online.

Dismantling the "Kids' Food" Archetype

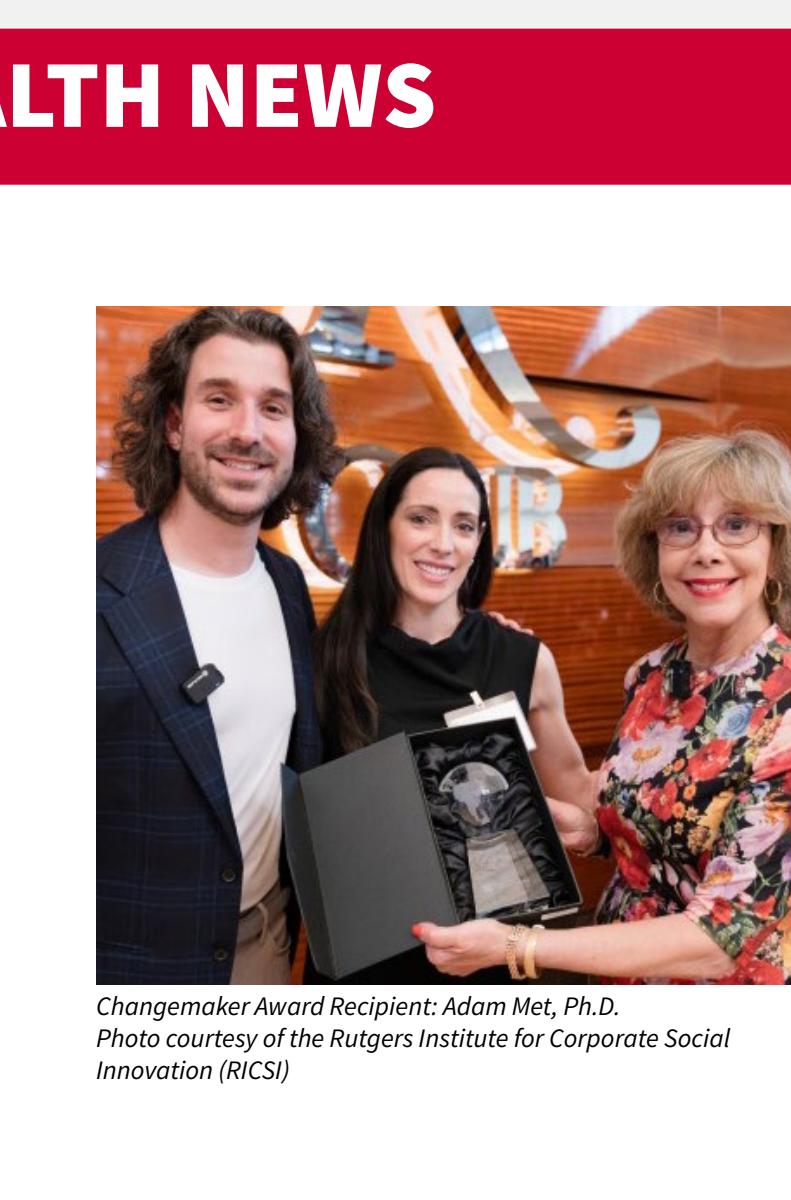
Principal Investigator: [Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia](#)

This project questioned why "kids' food" in the U.S. so often means ultra-processed, low-nutrient options. Through a photovoice project, families documented their food environments and shared personal reflections. The resulting exhibit prompted conversations about marketing, access, and culture—and shifted perceptions in powerful ways. [Review the "Kids' Food" Exhibit online.](#)

Transitional Housing Partners with Food Access Initiative

Principal Investigator: [Veronica Jones](#)

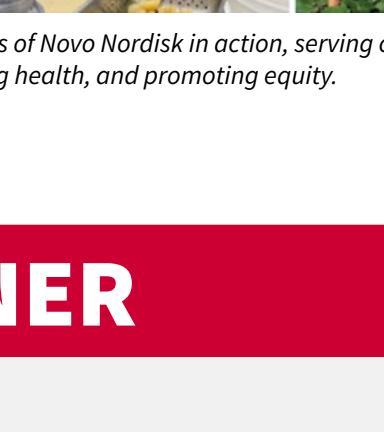
At Hope Village II in Newark, residents wanted more than food access—they wanted ownership. Working alongside Al-Munir Consulting LLC, the project built a greenhouse and launched a resident-led garden club. Participants learned to grow, harvest, and cook fresh produce, while forming relationships and pride in a shared space. Surveys showed increased confidence and knowledge across all topics. View the ["Hope Village II Garden Club"](#) video online which illustrates a deeper dive of this work.



Cancer screenings are a pivotal step in protecting individual and community health. By reducing the likelihood of late-stage cancer diagnoses and improve survival outcomes. These initiatives exemplify how RHSC members and our Office of Population Health can advance preventive care and strengthen health outcomes. Read the article on how Rutgers students are improving colorectal cancer screening.

This program is seeking partnerships to expand this initiative and improve CRC screening rates at other clinics. Interested in partnering? Reach out to us at rhsc@rhbs.rutgers.edu.

HPAC Series Speakers



Novneet Sahu, MD
Deputy Commissioner of Public Health Services for the New Jersey Department of Health



Christine Stearns, JD
Chief Government Relations Officer for the New Jersey Hospital Association



Heather Howard, JD
Director of State Health and Value Strategies; Former New Jersey Commissioner of Health

learning effective strategies for overcoming barriers in policy implementation, and exploring the role of academic institutions in driving policy change through research and collaboration with policymakers. Participants most appreciated the opportunity to learn from leaders who shared real-world examples and provided practical guidance for applying health policy concepts in their own work.

Our recommendations are rooted in practices that should be standard in organizations committed to equity. These practices include building intentional sponsorship programs for women of color, offering culturally grounded feedback training for managers, and ensuring transparent pathways for advancement. We also emphasize the importance of documenting achievements, creating cross-generational support, and embedding self-advocacy skills into leadership development programs.

Our work reminds us that leadership is not simply about titles. It is about voice, agency, relationships, and community. Organizations benefit when women of color are empowered to advocate for themselves and others as they bring clarity, innovation, and empathy to moments of uncertainty and change.

As we move into a future shaped by new technologies, evolving work models, and diverse leadership, we owe it to our communities to design workplaces where women of color do more than survive.

POPULATION HEALTH NEWS

Transforming Health: Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation Honors Danielle Mitchell and Novo Nordisk

Contributing Author: Jeana Wittenberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Professional Practice at the Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation (RICSI)

The [Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation \(RICSI\)](#) continues to celebrate leaders who exemplify business as a force for good through its inaugural [Corporate Social Innovation \(CSI\) Excellence Awards](#). The second installment spotlights Danielle Mitchell, recipient of the CSI Pionneer Award to health, equity and population health.

Novo Nordisk, Inc. embodies RICSI's mission of aligning profit with purpose through its holistic approach to combating chronic disease.

Beyond developing treatments, the company invests in prevention and food equity initiatives that strengthen local food systems and improve

partnership with [Share My Meals](#), delivering thousands of meals across New Jersey while reducing food waste. 2,300 employees in 43 states

for its annual Day of Service, and co-hosted the New Jersey School

Food Summit to demonstrate nutrition equity. Through these initiatives, Novo Nordisk demonstrates that advancing population health requires more than medicine—it demands community-rooted collaboration and systems-level change.

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The HPAC speaker series drew attendees from a range of backgrounds, including students, academic researchers, healthcare providers, and administrators at all career stages. Evaluation feedback indicated that participants valued gaining a clear understanding of the priorities and values of NJDOH, the difference between advocacy and lobbying,

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